FT
MEADE

4PZ
185
Copy 1

OTHER FOX 'ROUND TOP

ELLEN·D·WANGNER

THE ROUND TOP BOOKS

4-P7
185

MOTHER FOX HAD TAKEN THEM OUT
FOR A LITTLE PLAY. PAGE 48.

THE ROUND-TOP BOOKS

MOTHER FOX OF ROUND-TOP

By

ELLEN D. WANGNER

Author of "Bobby Lynx of Round-Top," "The Busy Beavers of Round-Top," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HENRY WANGNER

NEW YORK
THE NOURSE COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1921,
BY
THE NOURSE COMPANY

AUG -8 '21

©CL.A622352

CONTENTS

I.	Mother Fox and Her Family	7
II.	Mother Fox Goes Hunting	19
III.	Mother Fox and the Goose	31
IV.	Black Brother Has an Adventure	45
V.	Mother Fox Plays Dead	55
VI.	How Mother Nature Painted the Hill	69
VII.	Mother Fox's Escape	81
VIII.	Black Brother is Caught in a Trap	97

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

Mother Fox had taken them out for a little play . . . . *Frontispiece*

She had wandered far that night hunting for some large birds or rabbits to eat 13

Something white caught her eye, close by one of the tall strawstacks in the barn-yard 36

She dropped suddenly, full length, as if she were dead ! 61

There, right beside the coop, was his mother ! 105

CHAPTER I

MOTHER FOX AND HER FAMILY

Mother Fox of Round-Top

CHAPTER I

MOTHER FOX AND HER FAMILY

A RED, bushy tail waved for a moment among a pile of rocks and then slowly disappeared as Mrs. Fox pushed down into her underground home on the sunny slopes of Round-Top. It was a very lovely tail and Mrs. Fox was very proud of it, pulling the burrs and stick-tights out of it each day with her sharp teeth and keeping it as fluffy as she knew how.

It was a beautiful spring day and on Round-Top the rocky slopes were bright with spring blossoms. The wind-flowers nodded gaily in the warm breeze that blew

up from the marshes at the bottom of the hill, where the frogs were croaking and trilling like a fairy orchestra. Bees went gaily buzzing as they flitted from flower to flower, and the air hummed and sang with the hundreds of insects that flew happily about in the sunshine.

It was very warm on the hilly slopes, for the leaves were too small to give protection from the very hot sun, and Mrs. Fox, in her heavy coat, was very glad to get into her cool home that had been hollowed out underneath some huge, overhanging rocks.

There were many other fox homes on Round-Top Hill, but none was as carefully chosen and beautifully planned as was this home of Mrs. Fox. By the settlers in the farther end of the valley, she was called "Old Silver-Tip." Unlike any other fox they had ever seen, the whole lower half of her tail was a gleam-

ing white. She was known for something else, too. Among all the settlers, she was considered to be the wisest, slyest, most cunning old fox that had ever been seen on Round-Top!

Many and many were the traps that had been set for Mother Silver-Tip and many and many another fox had been caught in these very same traps, but Mother Silver-Tip was too wise to be trapped in any of them.

As she crept down into her cool, dark house, a chorus of sharp barks greeted her, and five little, fat, baby foxes rolled and waddled toward this big, furry animal that had meant food and warmth and comfort ever since they had been born in the snug little house.

Mother Fox licked each one of them with her warm, red tongue, cuffing little Black Brother with her soft paw as he bit at his little sister. Not for a moment

did their sharp barking cease, and poor Mother Fox was quite worried and tired before she had finished washing them and they all cuddled up beside her for their nap on the pile of grasses and leaves that filled the end of her house.

Now, many foxes dig their entire dens out of the ground, but Mother Silver-Tip did not like that kind of a house at all. And she had been very much pleased when she and Father Fox had found this den that was really more like a small cave, with a rear entrance where they could easily escape in time of danger. This back door of the house opened out on a high, narrow ledge of rock, jutting out over a stream that had cut a deep, rocky ravine down the side of the mountain. Pines and laurel and hemlocks grew close to the edge of the bank, dropping friendly branches down until the rocky ledge was completely hidden from view. And there,

SHE HAD WANDERED FAR THAT NIGHT, HUNTING FOR SOME LARGE BIRDS OR RABBITS TO EAT. PAGE 13.

when the first warm days of spring had come, Mother Fox would often lie, safe and sound, hidden by the deep, green boughs of the bending pines.

Mother Fox was very, very tired this morning. She had wandered far that night, hunting for some large birds and rabbits to eat. With five hungry babies to feed, Mother Silver-Tip had to work very hard to get enough food. Although she had found several nests of small ground-birds and had eaten all the eggs in them, that was all she had been able to find all night, although she had run clear to the top of the mountain and along the Ridge and down around the barns at the end of the valley.

Not a chicken nor a rabbit nor large bird had she been able to get, and she felt very tired and cross as she curled up to sleep in the cool Cave-House. Mrs. Silver-Tip had cause for worry, for the

five little foxes were ready now to have her bring some food home to them, and how she and Father Fox were to find enough to feed five little empty stomachs, poor Mother Fox did not know!

She made a soft sound in her throat as she washed little Black Brother again. There was no doubt about it,—Mother Fox loved little Black Brother more than she did all her other babies. Perhaps it was because he was just a little deeper color than the others, or, because he was a little bigger than the others, or, perhaps she knew that his woolly, grayish fur would one day become black with each hair tipped with white, making him a real "silver fox," and that, some day, he would be the most beautiful fox on Round-Top. Anyway, whatever the reason, he received more washings than the other babies, and his woolly, baby fur was as soft and silky as thistledown.

Mother Fox was a very beautiful fox herself and the long, white end of her bushy tail was very lovely indeed. The rest of her heavy coat was an extremely bright red, darker on the back and shoulders and shading to a light buff along the sides and legs. With her long, pointed nose and bright eyes, she looked very gentle and wise, and, as she snuggled down with her babies, she made a very beautiful picture.

Oh, how proud she was of those babies! No mother on Round-Top was half so proud and loving as was Mother Fox! Mrs. Rabbit and Mrs. Woodchuck didn't love Mrs. Silver-Tip at all and they would both have thought that her babies were very queer-looking, indeed, if they had chanced to see them. But Mother Fox was perfectly satisfied with these funny, little, woolly-coated creatures, with their broad noses and little, pointed tails

and small, stumpy ears. If you had seen them, as they wobbled about on their thick legs, you would never have believed that they would some day grow to be beautiful, slender, crafty foxes, with the pointed, narrow faces that look so wise.

Mother Fox felt very restless this hot, spring day. Several times, she whined as her babies snuggled up to her. She was so very warm with her heavy, winter coat on that even the cave seemed hot, now, and she wished the little foxes would go to sleep so that she might go out and lie on the cool, shady ledge overhanging the rippling brook far below.

There is no place much hotter than a deep woods in the first very hot days of spring, when the sun beats fiercely down on the bare, shadeless spots, where the wind never seems to strike and the new leaves give no protection from the heat. All the animals on Round-Top still wore

their heavy, winter coats, and, although they were beginning to shed them for the thinner, shorter fur of summer, yet, they all,—even little Mrs. Rabbit,—felt the heat very much indeed. Poor Mother Fox's coat was especially thick and warm, and her red tongue lolled out of her mouth as she panted beside the five little foxes in the cave. Soon, they were sound asleep and, as softly as a falling leaf, she padded out of the stuffy den and laid down on the cool, stone ledge where the pines made such grateful shade.

Now, like most wild animals, Mother Fox hunted at night and slept almost all day, and so, stretching her long, pointed nose out on her paws, just like a dog, she was soon fast asleep. Her sharp ears twitched every now and then as a Red Squirrel chattered angrily above her head in the big pine trees, or as some little dry leaf fluttered for a moment along the

stony ledge, frolicking with the gentle, spring winds that blew up the ravine. It was all so peaceful and quiet that Mother Silver-Tip stayed there until afternoon, when the sharp yelps of the little, hungry fox-babies called her into the cave once more.

CHAPTER II

MOTHER FOX GOES HUNTING

CHAPTER II

MOTHER FOX GOES HUNTING

When she came out of the cave again, the long, dark shadows of early twilight were creeping along the stony ledge, and Mother Fox knew it was time to go hunting once more. And she knew something else, too; this time, she must bring a rabbit or a partridge home for her children. They were getting so strong now and so large and their teeth were so very sharp, that they must have something solid to chew on and fight over and play with if they were to grow up to be the big, strong foxes that Mother Silver-Tip was determined they should be.

One thing worried Mother Fox very much indeed,—Father Fox had not come

home all day! Father Fox had kept her supplied with field-mice and rabbits and even a baby woodchuck once or twice, while she had been obliged to stay at home with the babies after they were born and needed so much of her care. Father Fox was a very wise, old hunter and Mother Silver-Tip wished him to know that it was time now to begin to bring plenty of food home for the children. So she crept very softly through the deep shadows underneath the pine trees and out along some sandstone ledges where she could look far down the mountainside and out across the Plains below.

Mother Fox seemed to know that her fur exactly matched the golden-red sandstone so perfectly that in the pale light still left on the mountainside, she looked like part of the rocks themselves. Here she sat and watched, her sharp, pointed ears turning this way and that as she

listened for Father Fox. Down below her, she saw some rabbits playing and frolicking about, never dreaming that that one red rock right above their heads was not a rock at all but their deadly enemy, —Mother Fox!

Above her, Mrs. Woodchuck waddled heavily along on her way to the thicket for roots, and even a yellow-tipped porcupine came out and sat on the rocks close by and sniffed and sniffed at all the smells that the soft, spring wind was bringing to his wiggling, snuffy nose. He did not see Mrs. Fox either, and the wind was blowing the wrong way to tell him of her,—a fact that Mother Fox knew quite well. But she wouldn't have touched him even if he had been within reach of her sharp teeth. All the animals on Round-Top know from bitter experience what Peter Porcupine will do if they try to catch him. He would just roll himself up into a ball,

a very prickly ball, and then fill the other animal's nose and mouth and paws full of his sharp-pointed quills. Glad enough are all the animals to let him alone. So Mother Silver-Tip only glanced at him once or twice, just to be sure that he was not near enough to harm her should the wind chance to tell him she was near. Then she continued looking down the mountain for Father Fox.

Father Fox had gone hunting with her the night before and they had kept together until they reached the Ridge. There they had separated, taking different trails, just as they often had done. What had become of him, Mother Fox did not know. The long shadows crept up the hill, farther and farther, until they covered Mrs. Silver-Tip with their gray cloak. Then she started off to hunt alone. Somehow, she seemed to know that Father Fox would not come home any more,

and that the little foxes must now depend on just their mother for food and training and lessons and play.

As she trotted softly down the mountainside, she made no more noise than the soft night wind itself as she carefully placed each dainty paw on the rocks or mossy slope. With ears well forward to catch every sound and with her keen eyes peering intently into the shadows on all sides, she seemed slowly to drift down the mountain. Each foot was put down as carefully and cautiously as a soft paw could be, and there was not the least sign of haste.

Mother Silver-Tip knew that wood-mice had many runways through the deep moss, and while she liked rabbit or birds far better, nevertheless several mice would satisfy her hunger so that she could take the long hunting trip that she meant to take that night. Or if she could only catch

a rabbit—mmm!—mmm! Mother Silver-Tip's mouth watered at the thought of a nice, tender rabbit.

Cautiously she dropped down the hill until she came to a dead tree lying across a big rock that jutted out from the mountainside and hung over the rough, steep slope. The night wind shifted for just an instant, and in that second, it brought a delicious tell-tale smell to Mother Fox's nose. It told of partridge near by,—right at hand, in fact. Mrs. Fox "froze" for just a moment, not moving as much as a hair,—only her keen eyes turned this way and that, and then—she jumped,—over the dead tree, almost to the very edge of the rock. Quick as she was, Mother Partridge was even quicker, and almost as Mrs. Fox landed in her nest, there was a quick, thick whirr-rr and Mother Partridge was gone! Mrs. Silver-Tip seemed to grin as she drew her lips back from her

white teeth; then she quickly ate the waxy eggs that filled the nest and continued her way down the steep hill.

Keen as were her eyes, however, there were other eyes just as keen on the mountain that night,—for the field-mice and wood-mice and the rabbits were watching for her just as eagerly as she was watching for them. Mother Rabbit had all her children out on the mountain to enjoy the warm spring twilight. She had four of the fluffiest, prettiest rabbit-babies that she had ever owned and she felt that they were the brightest rabbit-babies on the whole mountain. Young as they were, they had already learned their way around in the thicket that grew near their Spruce Tree House. At the slightest sign from Mother Rabbit, they would "freeze" like little stone bunnies, not even moving a whisker.

They had learned the smell of Bobby

Lynx,—one of their worst enemies,—and of Jimmy Weasel and of Father and Mother Fox. Mollie Rabbit never *could* see why all these animals wanted to eat her and her babies. *She* didn't want to eat *them,*—all she asked was just plenty of delicious leaves and bark. This was much nicer than eating each other. Mrs. Rabbit often had wondered, while she had tended her babies in their home 'neath the roots of the Hollow Spruce, why the wildcats and Jimmy Weasel and the foxes and the wolves were so very, *very* fond of eating her and her babies!

And Mrs. Woodchuck puzzled about this matter, too, as she popped up out of her warm burrow and watched Mrs. Fox go slowly down the hill. A dead leaf snapped against a limb of a tree and Mother Woodchuck popped back down into her home. She feared that it might be Father Fox, as he was always to be

found somewhere near by when Mrs. Silver-Tip was hunting. And poor Mrs. Woodchuck felt that hunting for roots had better be put off for a while.

Mollie Rabbit whisked her four babies down the hill, keeping well in the black shadows of some big, pine trees, being careful that the wind did not tell of her presence on the hillside. Now as Bobby Lynx and all the other wild creatures had learned, the wind is not only the animals' best friend but, also, their worst enemy unless they learn how to make use of him and keep him blowing *toward* them, if possible. In this way, he is their friend, but when he tells *about* them, then he is their enemy.

So the wind's lessons are the very first things all the wild mothers try to teach their children. How they do it and how the children learn it so well is one of dear, old Mother Nature's secrets that she will

not tell us. For Mother Nature loves the wild, little creatures on the hills and she does not intend to let us know too much about them. She feels that we know too much about them as it is, and so she keeps to herself this secret of how animals talk.

And we shall, probably, never know just how dear Mollie Rabbit had trained her babies so that they obeyed her exactly, and thus slipped away without Mrs. Silver-Tip seeing them or getting one smell of them.

CHAPTER III

MOTHER FOX AND THE GOOSE

CHAPTER III

MOTHER FOX AND THE GOOSE

When Mrs. Fox reached the foot of the mountain, the frogs were trilling and singing as hard as they knew how, keeping carefully out of Mother Fox's way, however, as Mrs. Silver-Tip was known to eat frogs if other food happened to be scarce. Their jingling, tingling voices rang shrilly in her ears and she poked her long nose down into near-by hummocks of rushes. But the frogs just slid off into the water and sang at her harder than ever their little frog-song that sounds so sweet and clear in the spring twilights:

Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling-ling!
What a joyous time is spring!
We all sing and shout with glee,
For we're happy as can be!
Tree—ee—ee—ee—ee—ee—ee!

Mother Fox didn't like their song at all. It hurt her very sensitive ears and, besides, it prevented her from hearing the other wood-noises that she wanted to hear. So she turned from the marshes and began to trot rapidly along the foot of the mountain. Long Pond glimmered in the starlight and Mrs. Silver-Tip galloped with easy lopes around its upper end.

If the partridges and rabbits and woodchucks could not be caught on the mountain, she knew a spot where she was sure of getting a delicious meal for herself and plenty for her children. This was the barnyard at the far end of the valley and, although it was very dangerous to go there, nevertheless several fat chickens could be caught in a single night if she were very careful and sly. Mother Silver-Tip licked her chops as she thought of those delicious, foolish chickens that were

so easy to get if only one were very wise and careful.

Bounding along on her slender legs that were just made for speed, it did not take her long to cover the miles between Long Pond and the settlers' farms. Here she began to go very cautiously and quietly, standing perfectly still at the least noise and then, when she was sure it meant no danger, stealing on again. Over the barnyard fence she went with a bound, around the corncrib and then to the chicken-house.

Carefully locked and screened as it was, it did not take her long to dig under one end of it and come up inside the coop. A fat, white hen was gone in a very few moments and then another. Each time she carried them out behind a big, gray rock outside the barnyard where she could lie safely hidden herself, yet where she could watch in all direc-

tions for Watch, the big dog on the farm.

Never had chickens tasted so good as did those two fat ones to Mrs. Fox! Then the thought of her little cubs at home sent her flying over the fence for the third time. She was just stealing around the end of the barn when something white, close by one of the tall straw-stacks, caught her eyes. It was a large, white goose that was keeping as quiet as ever a goose could keep, for he saw Mrs. Fox and he was watching her every move with big, round eyes.

Now if there were anything Mother Fox loved better even than chicken, it was a nice, fat goose, and one goose would be a fine breakfast for five babies, whereas one or even two chickens would not be much at all. With a bound so quick it caught Mr. Goosey-Gander all unprepared even to move, Mother Fox pounced

SOMETHING WHITE CAUGHT HER EYE, CLOSE BY ONE OF THE TALL STRAW-STACKS IN THE BARNYARD. PAGE 36.

on him. He only had time to hiss once or twice before she had snatched him up and was bounding away for home. But those two hisses were very nearly the means of putting an end to Mother Fox's hunting trips forever! Watch, the wise, old hunting dog, was just prowling through the garden toward the barn when his quick ears caught poor goosey-gander's sharp hisses, and he knew at once that something was wrong.

At the very instant he heard the frightened hiss of the goose, the wind had brought him a smell that spelled fox,—and fox close at hand. He had been trained from puppyhood to hunt foxes and the bristles rose stiffly along his spine as the wind told him that there was one right in his barnyard. Giving tongue that told his master and everyone in hearing that he was on the fresh trail of a fox, Watch did not seem to run, but to bound

forward by long, savage leaps. Over the fence he went in one graceful leap that carried him close to the big rock.

Now, Mother Silver-Tip knew the danger coming so swiftly behind her. She knew that she could outwit and outrun Watch, for she had done it again and again. But that had been on the mountainside or close to the dear, old hill. Here was an open plain where she had no chance to hide or double back on her tracks and so fool the dog. Besides,—she was carrying the very heavy goose and that would hinder her. So she decided to play a trick on Watch.

Foxes are so wise that no matter what new problem is put before them, they always seem able to understand it instantly and plan a way out of the trouble. A fox is a smaller, more delicate and less fierce animal than Bobby Lynx or the wolves or dogs that hunt him all the time, and so

Mother Nature has made the brain of a fox grow to such a degree that he is smart enough to save himself by his wits to make up for his lack of strength. And Mother Fox decided to use her wits as best she knew how! Like a stone, she dropped close to the big rock on its far side.

As Watch leaped, the wind told him that the fox was right ahead of him, and racing past the big rock, he tore along. Almost as he passed, Mother Fox bounded back over the fence and struck off through the orchard toward the Ridge that hedged in the valley. She knew that she would only have an instant's lead, as Watch would quickly come back to pick up her trail. She heard the farmer's voice now in the orchard behind her as she raced along on those slender, tireless legs of hers.

On she bounded, clearing the orchard fence, and then away across the level

plains toward the bottom of the Ridge. The goose was heavier than she had thought he was and the muscles of her neck and jaws were beginning to ache. If only she could reach the Ridge, she knew of hundreds of hiding places where she could escape from Watch. She could even squeeze down into any deserted burrow of a badger or woodchuck, and there she could escape by one of the many back ways. Or she could hide in the rocky caves that she knew so well, until she was rested enough to creep out or dig out some other way.

She raced on, her head held high to keep the goose from dangling in her way. The gray outlines of the Ridge were becoming clearer and clearer,—surely she could reach it! But Watch had a brain almost as clever as Mother Silver-Tip's. He had gone but a bound or two when he realized that he had lost the trail, back he

had dashed to the rock where he had picked it up again, and then, over the fence and through the orchard he had flashed, hot on her trail.

Mother Fox turned her head for a brief look behind her and her heart gave a frightened leap. The dog was close behind her! He was gaining on her! No time now to try to save the goose for breakfast,—he must be dropped! No time now for anything but the most desperate efforts to save herself. With the goose no longer weighing her down, she was off like a flash,—Watch no longer gaining, but holding his own!

On and on they went, and Mother Silver-Tip for the first time began to be afraid. Over a stream she bounded, clearing it in a beautiful leap that made her look as if she were flying, only to come down in a swampy, marshy stretch of ground at the foot of the Ridge. From

grassy hummock to hummock she leaped, and behind her came the dog. But he was much heavier than Mrs. Fox, and where she scarcely seemed to touch the grassy bunches at all, his weight drove his paws in until he found it hard to get along.

He was dropping behind now, a fact that Mother Silver-Tip knew as well as he did. With fresh courage, she bounded on, reaching the rocky slopes of the Ridge at last. Up—up the steep, gray sides, bounding across a ravine too wide for the heavy dog to clear, and then on and up and over the crest and down the far side where she struck a stream of water. Into it she plunged and waded far, far up-stream, thus destroying her scent. She did not leave the friendly little creek until she saw a big rock overhanging it. With a mighty leap, she managed to gain a foothold on a ledge of it. Up she crawled

and climbed until she could leap to another rock, and then another. Then, sure that her trail was completely destroyed, but not yet daring to go home, she curled up in a hollow tree to listen for Watch.

Soon, she heard him baying far down the creek where she had entered the water. Watch hunted and searched for the trail, but it was no use. He could not find it. Once more, the wise old fox had fooled him. Mother Fox curled herself up for a short nap. As soon as she was sure that he had gone home, Mother Fox intended to go back and get that goose if possible. And after Watch had crept back home, tired and ashamed, Mother Fox slept until toward morning, and then in the dim, misty dawn she once more stole cautiously and carefully over the Ridge and down to the Plain, and was soon bounding back home with the dead goose in her tired, aching jaws.

CHAPTER IV

BLACK BROTHER HAS AN ADVENTURE

CHAPTER IV

BLACK BROTHER HAS AN ADVENTURE

The early morning sun was turning the gray rocks all shades of pink and yellow as she crept to her den in the Cave-House. Black Brother was just peeking out of the front door. Mother Fox gave him a hard cuff with her paw. The cubs had been warned to lie still while she was gone and never, *never* to go out of the safe Cave-House. But Black Brother had always been very venturesome and had never obeyed as well as the other children. Now his disobedience told Mother Fox very plainly that it was high time that she began to take them out of the cave and give them their first lessons in woodcraft.

So, giving a peculiar little call that told the children to come outside at once, she trotted to the middle of the thicket that hid the front door of the Cave-House. Right in the middle of this thicket was a large grassy plot underneath a big tree. As the little foxes came slipping and waddling and sliding along behind her, she threw the goose down on the grassy mound. Then Mother Silver-Tip sát down on her haunches to see what they would do with it.

Poor, old goosey-gander had been dead for some time, and, sad to say, Mother Fox was very sorry about that fact. She would have liked to give the children a lesson in playing with the goose and then catching it again and again as it tried to escape, for a fox likes to play with his catch as a cat does with a mouse. But, now that the goose was dead, all they could do was to pounce on it with sharp,

angry barks and excited squeals and tear it to pieces, biting choice mouthfuls out of its soft, juicy flesh. How they tossed and tore and pulled poor goosey-gander, grabbing a mouthful of feathers every now and then and scattering them about, until the green mound looked as if a huge feather pillow had been emptied all over it.

Mother Fox looked at them with pride, as she saw how fiercely they snarled and scrambled over the goose. Of course, this was not the first time that they had been outdoors. When the first really warm days of spring had come and it looked as if the hard, cold winter were indeed over and done with, every evening Father and Mother Fox had taken them out for a little play right in front of the front door. All this, however, had just been play, and meant only to train and strengthen their baby muscles, although,

while playing, they had learned the "Keep Quiet" rule and the Rules of Obedience long ago.

They already had had a few field-mice and birds that Father Fox had brought to them in the cave, but this was their first meal that they had really had to fight over and bite and snarl about and pull apart for themselves. And it was their first visit to the middle of the thicket. Every few moments they would stop and peer timidly around, looking frightened until they saw their mother calmly watching them. Then they went on eating. But Mrs. Fox was not as calm as she looked to be. Her keen ears twitched now forward, now back, as she listened intently to the noises from the woodland.

She heard the soft, sliding sound of a huge black snake as he crawled up the rocks to a warm ledge. A lizard scuttled underneath a stone near by, and Mother

Fox decided to remember that stone and watch there. Lizards were very delicate food and she was very fond of them. A foolish, red squirrel crept out on the limb of the tree and scolded so angrily that he almost lost his balance. Mother Silver-Tip watched him very interestedly as he slipped along the limb; then she turned to look at her babies. How they tossed poor goosey-gander and how strong they were growing!

Soon there was nothing left but the feathers, and Mother Fox felt that they should now go back into the cave to sleep. But the five little foxes did not think so at all. They loved it out there in the thicket, and jumped and scampered around so happily that Mother Fox forgot her fears for a while and played with them,—dashing through the thicket, cuffing them over with her paws, wrestling with them until they grew so warm that their little, pink

tongues began to hang out of their little mouths and they panted for breath. Their eyes gleamed with excitement and Mother Fox looked at them very proudly. Surely they were going to be very bright children, and she decided that they could have a real hunting lesson very soon.

Mother Fox turned her head longingly toward the ravine where came the sound of the murmuring brook. She would have liked very much to lie on the cool, shady ledge, but she started toward the cave, the children following after. As the little foxes scampered into the cave, her quick ears caught a sound in the thicket behind her. She turned just in time to see Black Brother vanish up the hill beneath the low pine boughs that hung over the ravine. Mrs. Fox glared in anger. Had some enemy carried him off? With a snarl that sent the other children scampering into the den to huddle in fear at its furthest

end, she dashed into the thicket, bounded up the hill underneath the pines and looked around her. Black Brother was not to be seen!

Only for a moment was she in doubt, however,—as a faint, little whimper sounded from the ravine. With a bound, Mother Silver-Tip dashed through the laurel bushes and small, silver birches and low-hanging pine boughs that screened the edge of the ravine. There was Black Brother down on the ledge, closely huddled against the bank as if he feared every moment that he might fall the rest of the way down.

Poor, naughty, little Black Brother! He was paying very dearly for disobeying his mother and not going to the safe Cave-House when she had told him to. Venturesome as he was, he had determined in his baby mind that it would be pleasant to go for a little prowl up the

cool-looking hill, and he had fallen right off the edge of it! The low pine boughs had kept him from seeing where he was until too late! And it had been a very fortunate thing for him that he had chanced to fall where the ledge stuck out far enough to catch him!

Poor Black Brother felt venturesome no longer and he was a very happy little fox when Mother Silver-Tip dashed down the hill into the den and then out the back door on to the ledge! Somehow she managed to coax him to follow her, tremblingly and very badly frightened, along the shelf and back into the Cave-House.

Then, tired from their play and sleepy from their heavy breakfast, it was not long before the five little cubs were sound asleep, and Mother Fox could slip out to her well-hidden resting place on the cool ledge.

CHAPTER V

MOTHER FOX PLAYS DEAD

CHAPTER V

MOTHER FOX PLAYS DEAD

When night came, the moon crept up over the Ridge so big and yellow that it flooded all the mountainside with a light almost as bright as day, and the world was very beautiful. Poor Mollie Rabbit looked anxiously out the door of her burrow in the roots of the Hollow Spruce. She and her babies had been scampering and darting up and down the hillside in the early twilight when all the hill had been gray and little rabbits could not easily be seen by Bobby Lynx and the foxes. But this bright, yellow moonlight made Mrs. Rabbit feel very nervous. The night before, clouds had hidden the moon and it had been perfectly safe on the hill-

side. But to-night, every sharply-outlined shadow looked like an enemy just ready to pounce on her and her baby bunnies. So she finally took them all home and put them to bed. Then she stole back to look out into the brightly-lighted world, as she sat, safely hidden by the large roots of the spruce.

Now Mrs. Rabbit was, indeed, a wise Mother Rabbit and she had chosen a home underneath this tall tree that was at the very edge of a rocky slope. Huge, gray boulders reared their jagged heads here and there, and there were hundreds of safe little holes where a rabbit could hide unseen. On the other side of the spruce was a mossy slope, bordered by a thicket, and so Mollie and her babies had a safe, wonderful playground.

Now the cave where Mother Silver-Tip lived was a part of this same rocky formation,—just around an elbow of the hill.

Mother Rabbit knew about Mrs. Silver-Tip, but, as yet, Mrs. Fox, for all her wisdom, had not learned that there was a family of rabbits so close by. As a rule, the rabbits lived farther down the hill.

But to-night, as Mother Fox started out on her hunting trip, she had just reached the top of this rocky slope when the spring wind brought her a smell of rabbit. And the wind also told her that this rabbit was not very far away. Mollie Rabbit knew the Wind Lessons,—every one of them,—but what can a little rabbit do when the night wind does not play fair, but blows first this way and then that way, then crossways? The wind was behaving very badly this warm, spring night, for he frolicked in every direction, first one way and then another, and all the little animals had hard work keeping track of him.

So, almost at the very instant that he told Mother Fox that Mollie was near, he

whisked back and whispered to Mrs. Rabbit that Mother Silver-Tip was hunting that night. Poor little Mrs. Rabbit crouched back behind the spruce roots just as her keen eyes saw a sliding, moving shape creep out on the big rocks. It was Mother Fox. She did not know exactly where this rabbit might be that she had smelled, so she crept along as carefully as she knew how,—keeping out of the moonlight and close to the rocks.

For a moment she paused, and Mother Rabbit, forgetting that the moon was shining right on the front door of her house, poked her head out a little way to see better, and then,—Mother Fox knew exactly where she was and planned exactly what to do.

Now there is no doubt about it,—the fox family deserve to be called "wise"! There is no animal that seems so able to plan ways and means of solving a new

SHE DROPPED SUDDENLY FULL LENGTH,
AS IF SHE WERE DEAD! PAGE 61.

trap or a new danger as is the fox! And Mrs. Silver-Tip was the wisest of all the fox family! Anything made of wire, sticks or strings made her suspicious and on guard, and so no trap had ever caught *her!* The man-smell was one that always spelled an especial danger, and wherever her sharp nose caught it, she was at once as cautious as she knew how to be. She knew all the habits of all the animals, big and little, on Round-Top. So when she saw Mrs. Rabbit peering out from the Spruce Tree House, she knew just what to do to catch Mollie for her supper.

Walking boldly out into the moonlight, she slowly descended the rocky slope until she was at the very edge of the mossy spot that Mollie loved so well. There she dropped suddenly, full length as if she were dead! The moonlight shone on her very brightly and Mollie could see very plainly that not a whisker, not an ear, not

a paw moved! Mother Silver-Tip knew that a rabbit has more curiosity than almost any other wild animal, unless it might be Bobby Lynx or some of his family. And this wise, old fox knew that if she " played dead," that curiosity would soon make Mollie come out to look at her, and then—well, *then,*—Mother Silver-Tip would have a most delicious supper!

So there she was,—stretched out like a poor, dead fox, with her paws out stiff and straight as if they would never again go bounding over the dear old mountain! And, sure enough,—there was Mother Rabbit, wiggling and twitching her little nose and smelling all the secrets that the wind was bringing her, and hopping out a few steps to stare curiously at this fox that was acting in *such* a peculiar manner! Then as if suddenly frightened, she would dash back to the Hollow Spruce Tree House,—only to bob out again to stare at

the fox. Each time she grew a little bolder, and each time she ventured out a little closer and closer to Mother Fox, who was listening with all her ears to every move that Mrs. Rabbit made. Closer and closer came Mollie, but not quite close enough for Mother Silver-Tip to make her wonderful cat-like spring to catch her.

Mollie hopped a little nearer and then sat up quickly and stared hard! Curiosity was making her do something that she knew full well was most foolish. If she took just three or four more hops, Mother Fox would have her in an instant. And oh,—how eagerly Mrs. Fox was waiting for her to take those hops! But foolish Mollie was not so curious but that she could be just a little bit cautious. And so, just as Mother Fox believed she would soon have her supper, Mollie scuttled back down the hill for quite a dis-

tance. Then she began to hop up the mountain again, but this time, hopping in a wide circle that carried her far to the right of the spot where Mrs. Fox was lying. All that the fox could do was to lie still until Mollie overcame the last bit of her fear and caution and came close by.

So on Mollie went, pausing every hop or two to sit up and look earnestly at Mrs. Fox. Soon, she was above Mrs. Silver-Tip. The fox was still just as quiet and stiff as any dead fox you ever saw, and so down came poor, foolish Mollie,—hoppity—hoppity—until she was so close to Mother Silver-Tip that, had she been facing that way, it would have been the end of Mollie! But, fortunately for Mollie, Mrs. Fox was facing down hill, and so Mollie was at her back. The wind was blowing down hill and he told Mother Fox how close Mother Rabbit was getting

just as plainly as if she were watching Mollie with her own sharp eyes.

Mollie was so sure that this wise, old fox was dead, that she did not try at all to obey the wind rules that she knew so well. Another hop or two and then,— Mrs. Fox seemed to bound into the air and turn around all in one quick flash. Poor, startled Mrs. Rabbit saw the flashing eyes and the sharp, white teeth as Mrs. Fox leaped at her. But Mrs. Rabbit had not been quite as close as Mother Fox had thought, and the sharp teeth snapped together several inches below her little, white tail as she went bouncing up the hillside.

Mrs. Fox darted after her, feeling sure that her long leaps could soon overtake little Mrs. Rabbit. And if Mollie had not known of all the hiding places in the rocks, that is just what would have happened. Her short legs were no match at all for

the long, slender ones of Mrs. Fox. But just as poor, frightened Mollie could almost feel Mrs. Fox's hot breath on her back, there opened up before her in the rocky slope, the very hiding place she had been heading for.

A root of a tree had reached down in a tiny crack of a big rock long, long years ago and there it had grown and grown until it had split the rock from top to bottom, making an opening just wide enough for a rabbit to dash into. Mrs. Rabbit plunged into the friendly crack and pushed and shoved as far back in as she could go.

Mrs. Fox was angry! Her jaws snapped with sharp, vicious clicks as she thought of her lost supper. Then, she lay down very quietly near the crack, believing that Mollie would have to come out the way she went in. But this hiding place was a very fine one, indeed. All

Mrs. Rabbit had to do was to crawl up behind the big root, push softly through some very loose earth and leaves and—there she was outside and on *top* of the rock.

Stealing away as quietly as ever a little rabbit could, she made a wide circle, finally coming back to the safe little home 'neath the Hollow Tree. Mrs. Fox waited and watched at the opening of the split rock. The bright moonlight began to grow paler and paler, and still she watched for Mrs. Rabbit. At last, convinced that if she wanted any supper, she must give up all hope of Mollie, she slowly crept away from the rock and leaped quickly down the mountainside.

As she neared the foot of the hill, a curious and very beautiful sight met her eyes. The day had been so very warm and the night so cool, that the whole valley was filled with a heavy, white mist that

looked in the moonlight like a vast, silvery lake. It completely hid the Plains and the Marshes and Long Pond and it was very beautiful. But Mrs. Fox didn't think about that part at all. To her, this wonderful mist just meant an added protection to her as she loped off toward the barnyard. So completely was she hidden that she secured a very bountiful breakfast for her children,—so many chickens, in fact, that the farmer decided that something would surely have to be done about it.

CHAPTER VI

HOW MOTHER NATURE PAINTED THE HILL

CHAPTER VI

HOW MOTHER NATURE PAINTED THE HILL

When Mrs. Fox called her five little cubs out of the cave next morning, they knew exactly what to do and there was an eager race behind Mother Fox to the grassy mound in the thicket. And then again, the little mound looked as if a feather pillow had been emptied all over it. It was another beautiful day on Round-Top and, as it promised to be even warmer than the day before, Mother Fox decided to take the children out on the Ledge.

She felt that it was high time for their real lessons to begin. Carefully she led them out to the cool, shady shelf, and in

her wonderful way, made them understand that they were safe out there. The little cubs were greatly frightened at first, but when they had snuggled down close to the bank with their mother between them and the edge of the ledge, they were very happy and contented. The spring wind blew across the ravine, bringing a smell that told Mother Fox that Peter Porcupine was prowling around on the other bank and the little foxes learned that smell right then and there.

They were very intelligent children, indeed, and that afternoon when they had their first lesson in hunting, Mother Fox had every reason to be proud of them. Each one of them caught a wood-mouse in the deep moss and learned how to follow the little runways in the grass and just when and how to pounce. Oh, it was great fun and the little foxes would have liked to keep the hunt up all day long.

But there were other lessons to be learned, —hard, long lessons they were, too, that took not only that day but many, many days and nights.

There were the wind lessons to be learned and the smell of each animal. There were hunting lessons and running and hiding lessons, lessons in digging and in covering up the trail. There were lessons in wading in the cool, mountain brooks to break the trail. There were long, hard lessons in chasing rabbits, that carried them up and over the top of the mountain and across the Ridge, and then home again so tired that they could hardly sleep. There were lessons in learning all their enemies and how to avoid them, lessons in being both the hunter and the hunted,—they had to learn how to have many ways of escape.

The deadly enemy, MAN, had to be studied most carefully of all, and the man-

smell was one that the cubs disliked more than any other. When they stole through the cornfields down on the Plains, the bristles rose on their necks as they circled round and round the old scarecrow that the farmer had put there. All that their wise, fearless mother knew about traps and poisoned bait and chickens put out just to catch her and her children, they had to learn. They were taught to " play dead" to fool the silly rabbits and ground-hogs. Many and many a delicious meal was secured by this clever trick that always fooled these creatures who were so full of curiosity that they forgot to be wise.

Oh, it was such fun to be alive these beautiful spring and summer days, and lessons were truly delightful when one had such a wise teacher as Mother Silver-Tip. When evening came, they frolicked and played in the dear, old thicket safely

sheltered on all sides by the walls of leaves that had grown so glossy and thick in the beautiful summer days.

And how the little foxes themselves had grown! No longer did they have their baby coats. Black Brother's was getting darker every day, and his little brothers and sisters had beautiful coats of a tawny red. Their little noses had become pointed like Mother Silver-Tip's and their tails were fast becoming thick and bushy. Their legs that had been short and fat, now were so slender that it seemed as if they might snap or break like small, brittle twigs. Altogether, they were as beautiful a family as had ever lived on Round-Top!

Bobby Lynx had seen them several times and he would have liked very much to have one of them for his breakfast. But, although Bobby was larger and stronger and fiercer than the foxes, and

more cruel, and although his claws were so powerful and sharp that they could easily have ripped the pretty, tawny coats right off the backs of the little cubs, nevertheless he never got close enough to touch them.

Mother Nature has tried to give each animal some especial means of defense. To Bobby Lynx, she gave his cruel claws and the great strength combined with lightness that enables him to spring from a tree or a height on to his prey. To Grandfather Black Bear, she has given claws even more powerful than Bobby's, and one hug of his huge arms will crush any animal that he chances to catch. And so the bears are not afraid of anything in the forest. To the skunks, Mother Nature has given a most effective weapon, and Peter Porcupine's quills can make even Bobby Lynx or Grandfather Black Bear glad to let him quite alone. But to

the fox family, she has given no such gifts as these. Instead, she has given them legs made for such endurance and speed that they can outrun most of the wild animals, and a brain that can devise ways and means of outwitting all their enemies,—even man.

And so Bobby did not catch the little foxes although he tried very hard. All through the long, beautiful summer, they played and hunted and learned so many lessons that they were almost as wise as Mother Fox herself.

And then fall came with its wonderful colors. The maples down the slopes of the dear, old hill turned to every shade of red and orange and yellow. Some of the oaks became almost purple, while the hickory trees wore the loveliest dresses of yellow. Old Mother Nature just splashed her lovely colors all over the mountain until it was more beautiful than

any picture that had ever been painted by man! Even the smallest shrubs were not overlooked, but were dyed in the most brilliant colors by Jack Frost, who came out every night to help Mother Nature with her painting.

He had a great deal of work to do. The burrs on the chestnut trees must be opened so that the delicious, brown nuts could tumble out, and the hard, green covering on each hickory nut had to be split. The walnuts and butternuts, too, had to be touched so that they would rattle down easily in the wind. He darted here and there over the mountain and down in the Plains and through the corn-fields in the valley. Oh, he was very busy, indeed, and oftentimes the sun crept up and caught him still at work. Then away he would fly, leaving behind him a white, silvery patch of frost on the grasses where he had sat down to rest a moment.

Mother Nature's workshop was very, very busy. All the squirrels and chipmunks were so hard at work gathering the nuts for winter that they sometimes forgot that there might be hungry foxes prowling around through the woods. Many and many a careless squirrel paid for his eagerness to gather his winter stores!

The rabbits and the woodchucks and Bobby and Tommy Lynx were growing warm, heavy coats for winter, and the fur of Mother Silver-Tip and her children was getting thick and glossy. All of the family had coats longer and thicker than even those of the gray wolves that lived on the other side of the mountain. Black Brother was a glossy black with nearly all of the hairs of his coat tipped with white. He was a real silver fox and if the hunters in the valley below had ever caught sight of him, they would never have

rested until they had caught him. Many and many a fox had been trapped and caught that fall, but not one of Mother Silver-Tip's family.

CHAPTER VII

MOTHER FOX'S ESCAPE

CHAPTER VII

MOTHER FOX'S ESCAPE

THE fox family had come through the summer safe and sound and only one of them had had a bad adventure. And this had been Black Brother himself and it was his own fault, because he had disobeyed his mother. He had been warned many times never to touch a porcupine, but, when he saw fat Peter Porcupine sitting on the low stump of a tree chattering to himself in his silly way, Blackie decided that he really must be harmless and decided to get him for his supper. That was the very worst experience in all Black Brother's little life and never, never would he forget it!

No sooner had he grabbed Peter, than he became the most miserable little fox

on Round-Top. He just sat and cried and squealed with the pain. For Peter had loosened all of his very sharp quills, and poor Blackie's nose and his tongue and his paws were filled with them! If he tried to pull the quills out of his paws with his teeth, those in his nose hurt him. And if he tried to brush the stinging, painful things off of his nose with his paws, the paws hurt him so badly that he could scarcely bear the pain. Somehow he managed to pull some out, and those that hadn't been stuck in very tightly were brushed out, and so, limping and whining and suffering, he managed to get back to the safe Cave-House.

Mother Silver-Tip pulled at the quills with her sharp teeth. It hurt him very much, but Mrs. Fox kept at it until she had pulled almost all of them out; the rest broke off and how Blackie got rid of them all,—no one can tell. But after a long

and very painful time he could eat in comfort again and could limp around. But from that time he would run in fear if he even saw one of these walking pincushions. It was fortunate, oh, very fortunate for Blackie that this particular porcupine had been a young one and his quills not as dry and sharp as an old one's. Had Peter been older, it might have been the end of Blackie!

Aside from that one accident, their summer had been a very happy one, and no hunter or dog had found their cave. There was a very good reason for this and that was the location of the den. Mother and Father Fox had remembered all the lessons that the forest had taught them when they had first found and chosen the Cave-House. Stones do not hold a scent very long and the front door of the small cave opened out on a long, rocky slope, screened by the friendly thicket, while

the back door, as we know, opened on to the shelf of rock. Moreover the cave itself was at a corner of the hill, midway up the mountain where the dogs and hunters seldom climbed. And, as if that were not protection enough, Mother Silver-Tip that summer had learned of a very safe, although very difficult, way to reach the cave after a hunting trip. Each of the cubs had learned it, too, and their wise mother made them use it.

This new path followed a stony bank on the other side of the little creek to where a big oak had fallen across the ravine. By running out on the oak, it was but a little jump down into the stream whose friendly waters washed away all trails. Up the creek for two or three hundred feet went the new path to a rock that jutted out into the stream. A jump up to this rock and then to another and another, a scramble up the sloping bank

and there they were, right at the end of the shelf that led into the Cave-House. Once on the rocky ledge, they were screened from view, and several times that summer had Mother Silver-Tip been lying there securely hidden while the hunters had beaten up and down through the woods on the opposite bank without seeing her.

Had Mrs. Fox but known it, they were hunting especially for her. As her cubs had grown, larger and larger had grown their appetites, also, and larger and ever larger had grown the number of chickens and ducks and geese that Mother Silver-Tip had stolen for them. And now that the farm work was nearly done for that season, and the leaves had all gone from the trees so that a hunter or a dog could see a fox for a long distance, the farmer and his son decided that they would catch this wise fox that had robbed them all

summer. Then came the day that was the worst that the fox children had ever known!

It was really a very beautiful day. The air was crisp and cold and the sunlight shining as brightly as it knew how. King Winter had not come himself as yet to the mountain, but he had sent on several of his most trusted helpers,—Jack Frost and the North Wind and Gray Clouds all ready to send down the snow as soon as Winter himself was ready to come. Mother Fox thought it would be a fine day to go hunting for rabbits or partridges. She and her cubs had been out all night and several plump chickens had disappeared from the farmyard. The grassy bank had been covered with feathers in the early morning but the North Wind had caught them up and whirled them like snowflakes down into the ravine, where the Friendly Stream ran away with them.

Mother Fox had had a chicken for her midnight meal, but after she and her family had rested a while and had a nap in the den, she began to get restless and decided to go out for a good breakfast. She loved to hunt on such cold, fresh days. The little cubs were nearly half-grown now. With their lovely winter coats and pointed faces and bushy tails, they were fast growing to look like Mrs. Fox, and, thanks to her careful training, they were almost as wise as she was. So when, this morning, she started out on her early hunt, she felt that they were safe and sound and perfectly able to take care of themselves, and she knew that they would stay in the den until she came back.

Up the mountain she went and along the Ridge in search of some grouse and partridges that she knew of. But the grouse and the partridges were also wise, and they had all gone far up the moun-

tainside where there might be some berries in the moss underneath the big pine trees and where the heavy green boughs would protect them from the keen North Wind. So Mother Silver-Tip did not find them, and she crept down the Ridge almost to the Plains in search of rabbits. She was always sure of finding some near the swamp where they could easily gather the bark of the young trees in the thicket. Slowly she prowled along, finally finding a fresh trail of a rabbit that had gone out to the marsh that had almost dried up in the long, dry autumn.

Leaping lightly from hummock to hummock, she soon spied the little rabbit. But he saw her as soon as she did him, and he dashed madly out of the swamp toward the Plains. Mother Silver-Tip watched him for a moment in disgust. Then she bent down to bite out a thorn in her fore-foot. So intent was she that, for an in-

stant, she actually forgot where she was. She also forgot to think about the wind.

Suddenly she caught a sound that brought her quickly to her feet. Three dogs and two men were coming toward the Ridge. She turned to creep back to the Ridge. She had barely reached its lower edge when the dogs gave tongue. They had found her trail,—it was a fresh one and they were running after her as hard as they knew how! The farmer had borrowed two of the best hunting dogs he knew, and with these after her and the fox in plain sight, he felt sure that this time they would catch her.

The farmer forgot the number of mice and rabbits and woodchucks that she had eaten. Had all of these lived, they would have harmed his crops far more than the value of the chickens she had stolen. Up over the Ridge went the dogs and men, Mrs. Fox heading for the far side, hoping

to fool them as she had fooled Watch when she had stolen the goose. Not for anything would she head for her den where her children were. Up she bounded, the dogs so close behind that she could not pause for a breath.

The men left the trail and, calling one of the dogs, ran along the crest of the Ridge hoping to dash down in time to head her off. Sure enough, just as she came out of the stream that she had thought would fool them, there were the men bounding down the bank. Back to the stream she flew and over into the deep woods, taking a long circle that would carry her many miles beyond Round-Top where she hoped to lose the dogs and hide in one of the many holes that she knew of.

But the men and the dog Watch seemed to know just what she planned to do, and they cut across Round-Top, to come down on the far side and head her off again.

Just as they were above the Cave-House, a fox appeared for a moment above them on the rocks. It was a stray fox that had heard the baying of the dogs down in the valley and had decided to take a round-about way to her home. Bang! went the terrible guns and the dog yelped and barked as he set out on the trail of the newcomer. The poor little foxes in the Cave-House shivered with fear as they listened to this awful racket,—the worst that they had ever heard in their lives. It was too steep and rough for the men to follow the strange fox, and it was not long before the dog himself returned. Somehow the fox had given them the slip on the steep slopes and the dog had been unable to pick up her trail.

The wind brought the powder smell down into the Cave-House, and as the men and the dog raced around, it brought the scent of them, too. It was the very

worst smell that the wind had ever brought to the little foxes and they cowered together in fear.

Poor Mother Fox heard the guns. She was running as hard and as fast as she could, but so was Watch, and she had only been able to dodge him once or twice, just long enough to rest her weary legs for a few moments. Then he had her trail again and off she had to go. She realized that she could not reach her hiding places beyond the mountain. The mountain itself was better. She decided to climb old Round-Top hoping to tire the dogs out.

Back she doubled on her trail, once more finding the Friendly Stream. For a long way, she waded, then up the steep hillside at full gallop, her breath coming in quick gasps. She had run many miles with almost no chance for a rest. Up and over the hill she raced, and down the rocky slopes to get into the ravine. Far

behind her came the baying of Watch. Swiftly she fled down the slope, crossing the trail of the men and the dog.

As they heard the dog's baying, they turned back, as they knew that Silver-Tip must be heading back across the hill. Wise Mother Fox had smelled the trail of the men and dog, and realizing that a new danger threatened her, she fairly flew down the mountainside! It was well for her that she ran as she did, for she had hardly reached the ravine when the dog picked up her trail and came flying after her, followed by the men. Again came the shrill yelping of the dog and the shouts of the men, frightening the little foxes so that they hardly dared breathe.

Mother Silver-Tip's last hope lay in reaching the new path she had learned. The Friendly Stream helped her all that it could by washing away all traces of her trail as she leaped from the fallen oak into

its gurgling depths. With aching legs, she gained the big rock, the next, and the next, and, at last, the shelf. Hidden by the pine boughs, she reached the Cave-House to drop wearily beside the frightened cubs. Oh, how glad they were to see her, and how they licked her weary face as she lay panting on the floor!

From far below came the excited yelps of the dogs and the shouts of the men. Again Mother Silver-Tip had fooled them and they were determined to find her. Through the woods and the thickets they threshed on the opposite side of the ravine, encouraging the dogs by shouts.

Never would the little foxes forget that day as long as they lived! And then, as the sun sent long, slanting shadows down into the ravine, the men went home. Again had Mother Silver-Tip been too wise for them.

CHAPTER VIII

BLACK BROTHER IS CAUGHT IN A TRAP

CHAPTER VIII

BLACK BROTHER IS CAUGHT IN A TRAP

For a day or two the foxes did not stray very far away from the den. And then, —they forgot all about their scare and went hunting again. They had eaten up all the woodchucks and mice and rabbits that were to be found near the cave, and each day they had to go farther and farther out on the mountain to find anything at all. Mother Fox was giving them final lessons in hunting, teaching them everything that she knew. Sometimes they all went out together and then separated, the little cubs frisking around in the safe thickets and rocky slopes.

Sometimes just one little fox would go

with Mrs. Fox, and the others would stay in the den and sleep. It was great fun romping about the mountainside on the clear, frosty nights. The whole family was having a fine time. The little foxes played together like a lot of fluffy collie puppies, wrestling and biting and chewing each other, pouncing on one another and exercising all their muscles until they were fast becoming very quick and strong.

And then came the night that Blackie went hunting all by himself. Mother Fox had trotted up the hill just to look around for a moment or two. Black Brother and his little sister were wrestling and playing in the Cave-House, and the three other cubs were half asleep in the corner. Black Brother soon tired of his play. He wanted to go outdoors. He was never satisfied to stay long in the cave, and so, in a few moments, he pushed sister over and crept out on the mountainside.

A little rabbit, frightened by Mother Fox, scurried down the hill and Black Brother shot after her. Pell-mell down the mountain they went, the little rabbit just managing to keep a little bit ahead. Reaching the bottom of the hill, she darted along the edge of the swamp, bobbing and bouncing along until they were close by the upper end of Long Pond that shimmered and gleamed in the frosty night. And there, somehow, Black Brother lost her.

Black Brother was very tired; he was also very hungry, and he was very badly scared. He had never been so far away alone before, and he turned to race back home before anything happened to him. And then, there came to his nose the scent of a chicken close at hand,—oh, such a delicious smell!

Now Blackie had been taught all about traps and poisoned bait that Mother Fox

could teach him. And he had learned his lessons well. But he was *so* hungry, and surely this delicious smell could not mean danger! He would just sneak up and find this chicken and then dash back to the Cave-House. It was not difficult to find the chicken. It lay right at the edge of the pond in some rushes and reeds. Black Brother smelled carefully and crept forward as slowly and cautiously as a little fox could. There was nothing to be seen nor smelled that spelled danger and he gave a quick grab at the chicken.

And then,—oh, then,—what was this terrible thing that had him by the foot! Black Brother was caught in a trap at last! Tear around as he might, bite at it with his sharp teeth as much as ever he liked, the trap would not let go, and Blackie cowered down in a miserable little heap. All night he had to stay there, so cold and frightened that he was a very,

very unhappy little fox! Once he heard Bobby Lynx cry way up on the mountain and he was too scared even to whimper. It seemed as if the night would never end.

When the sun came out bright and clear and had driven Jack Frost away from the mountain, a boy and girl came eagerly around Long Pond. They had set this trap, hoping to catch some animal whose fur was valuable. When they saw poor frightened Blackie, they did not know just what to do, for they had never seen an animal that looked like him. He looked like a fox, yet all the foxes they had ever seen were red! He wasn't a wolf nor a bear nor a lynx,—of that they were sure. He must be a fox, they decided, and so, trap and all, they put him into a large bag that they had brought with them, and carried him home to the farm.

It was a very fortunate thing for

Blackie that no one was at home that day but the boy and girl and their mother. All the others had driven off with loads of wood to the town many miles away. Now Blackie, no doubt, thought that it was the most unlucky day in his life,—but it was *not!* It was a very fortunate one, indeed! Had the men been at home, they would have known at once what kind of a fox he was, and just how valuable was the fur coat that he had on! And that would have been the end of Blackie right then and there! But the boy and girl did not know and their mother did not know, so they decided to put him in one of the smaller chicken coops that had been used earlier in the season for a mother hen and her brood.

Across the slats in the one open end of the coop they nailed chicken wire, then placed the coop on a large, flat stone outside the spring-house so that he could not

THERE, RIGHT BESIDE THE COOP, WAS HIS MOTHER! PAGE 105.

dig out. Then they left him. Poor Blackie! One good thing they had done, they had taken the hurting trap off of his foot and that did not pain so badly now. But oh, how he wished he could go back to the Cave-House, and if only he could see his mother once more! Luckily for Blackie, Watch had gone with the teams, so that he did not have him to worry about. And fortunately, too, the farmer had been detained in town and was very late getting home. Oh, it was, indeed, a very lucky day for Blackie!

The wind rose and a few flakes of snow fell, and Blackie curled up in a little ball at the end of the coop. He was sound asleep when a familiar smell crept to his little nose. He was wide awake in an instant and there, right beside the coop, was his mother! What they said to each other, no one knows, but he probably told her exactly what had happened. Mrs.

Fox was very nervous. Any moment she expected that Watch would bounce out at her. But he did not come. She smelled all around the coop and poked it with her nose. There did not seem to be any way in which to get Blackie out.

Then she poked it again and,—*it moved!* She poked some more,—it slid off the big stone. Once more she pushed and it rolled down a little bank and upset. In the bottom of the coop was a small, broken board. Mother Fox pushed with her long nose,—slowly,—slowly. The half-rotten board bent inward. There was a sharp crack, and Mother Fox had Blackie by the head, pulling and yanking and tugging and dragging at the poor little fellow until, with a final pull that hurt him very much,—he was out! Blackie was free!

Away they went! No time for chickens or geese now! They had a long, hard trip

ahead of them, for Blackie was limping and Mother Fox knew that they could not go straight home. That would leave too plain a trail! So over the Ridge and up the stream they went and clear around the dear, old hill to its farther side, and then more wading and more climbing until they came, at last, safely to the Cave-House.

Poor Blackie was so lame and tired that he just flopped right down on the floor of the den and was asleep long before Mother Fox ceased washing him.

How did Mother Fox learn where Blackie was? Only Mother Nature can tell us that and it is a secret that she refuses to explain, although many, many wise men have tried to make her tell it.

Nor do we know how she taught her children so well, nor how she learned to cover her trail and do all the wise, wonderful things that she did do. No one knows.

But that the little foxes learned their lessons very well, we surely do know because they escaped every trap and snare set for them, except that one time. And the little foxes,—big foxes now, with homes of their own,—and dear, old Mother Silver-Tip still live on the sunny slopes of old Round-Top to this very day.

And Grandfather Black Bear and Bobby Lynx still live there and Mollie Rabbit and all of her children. But most interesting of all is a new family that has moved in at the foot of the Hill, at the end of Long Pond, where they are building a wonderful town all of their own.

These little animals are masons and wood-choppers and engineers and house-builders and they are very, very odd looking little fellows with broad, flat tails and great, yellow front teeth. Oh, they are very interesting, indeed! If you would

like to know about them and of their queer homes, we will tell you in another book which we shall call "THE BUSY BEAVERS OF ROUND-TOP."

THE END

The following pages contain questions with space for the answers to be written by

---

The owner of this book.

WHAT DID MOTHER FOX LOOK LIKE?

WHAT KIND OF HOMES DO FOXES HAVE?

NAME TEN ANIMALS ON ROUND-TOP THAT MOTHER FOX LIKED FOR FOOD.

HOW DID BLACK BROTHER'S FUR DIFFER FROM THAT OF HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS?

WHEN DO FOXES SLEEP AND WHEN DO THEY HUNT?

WHAT ANIMALS ARE THE ENEMIES OF THE FOX FAMILY?

WHY ARE FOXES CALLED "WISE"?

WHAT CAN A FOX DO TO HELP IN COVERING UP ITS TRAIL?

WHAT LESSONS DID THE FOX CHILDREN HAVE TO LEARN?

WHY DO ALL THE ANIMALS LEAVE PETER PORCUPINE ALONE?

LC FT. MEADE
0 018 975 297 0